

# Parliament protest and the threat of unpredictable violence

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## Extremism

***Tuesday's rally is the latest step in the ratcheting up of the stakes on the anti-vaccination fringe - a process that risks inciting random acts of violence, Marc Daalder reports***

**Analysis:** Most of those who attended Tuesday's anti-vaccination protest outside Parliament had never expressed an intention to storm the building or engage in any other act of violence.

Of those who had written such messages online in the days ahead of the march, or who echoed them in person as protesters converged on Parliament grounds, the vast majority had no real intention of following through with their threats.

But the sad truth is that it only takes one person with the

means and motivation to commit a violent act. And the likelihood is there were at least a few people with the motivation in Tuesday's crowd.

The amped up security at Parliament (Speaker Trevor Mallard said it was unprecedented in his 34 years as an MP) combined with widespread media coverage and social media chat created a sense of expectation or worry around the risk of a January 6-style storming of government buildings. That this didn't eventuate, however, doesn't mean that the event should be dismissed as much ado about nothing.



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Recall that the insurrection at the United States Capitol earlier this year didn't occur spontaneously, out of thin air. It was the result of heated online and in-person commentary falsely alleging a stolen election, occurring after dozens of skirmishes between Donald Trump supporters and anti-fascist activists ranging back to 2015 and including the deadly Charlottesville rally; and sparked by the pre-planned actions of far-right militia members who initiated the storming of the building.

Many of these elements are not present in New Zealand. Although we have a small core of extreme right activists, they don't have the organisation nor the dedication of

America's militiamen.

What we do share with the United States is an environment of toxic, extremist speech that has seized on the Covid-19 pandemic to further the aims of the far right. This speech has also significantly increased in prevalence and the radical degree of the rhetoric since the start of the Delta outbreak, according to [a new research paper from Te Pūnaha Matatini's Disinformation Project](#).

"Since the return to Alert Level 4 settings across the country on August 17, 2021, there has been a sharp increase in the popularity and intensity of Covid-19-specific disinformation and other forms of 'dangerous speech' and disinformation, related to far-right ideologies," the paper found.

"Telegram channels and groups proliferate content which is violent, far-right, and related to the conspiracy theory QAnon, signalling a near-frictionless shifting of New Zealanders from vaccine hesitancy, to vaccine resistance, and then to content reflective of wider conspiratorial ideologies."

As this speech ramps up, both online and at events like Tuesday's rally, the risk of one or more people being motivated to a "random" act of violence increases.

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*security risks presented by this movement must be understood in that context.*

Experts call this stochastic terrorism. It occurs as a result of extremist messages that either explicitly incite violence or contribute to an environment where people feel the stakes are life and death and come under immense pressure to take some sort of radical, potentially violent, action. They can span the range from threats to hang the Prime Minister, as seen on Tuesday, to (false) messaging around one's children being forcibly vaccinated and then killed by the vaccine, also seen on Tuesday. This latter speech doesn't explicitly call for violence - but if you believed it to be true, it's easy to see how that might push you to violence nonetheless.

Stochastic terrorism is usually a one-way process. People with large platforms send their messages into the ether, where individuals who receive them are then seemingly randomly mobilised to violence. Think of the Isis model of terrorism, in which calls to commit attacks in Western countries were unpredictably picked up by isolated, disaffected young men who then carried out those orders without ever directly organising with the terrorist group.

Kate Hannah, the lead author of the Disinformation Project paper, says the usual conception of stochastic terrorism as being "random" needs reworking.

"It is unpredictable, but it's not random," she told Newsroom.

For the individual who is mobilised to violence, the act is not spontaneous but the conclusion of a personal journey through what is seen as an increasingly high-stakes environment, until violence appears to be the only resort. The more isolated or disaffected the individual is, the shorter that journey may be - what else do they have to lose? This highlights [the role of social cohesion in preventing terrorism](#).

But we also need to focus on the processes which create those high-stakes, high-pressure perceptions.

Tuesday's rally is not just a symptom of this process, but a key part of perpetuating it.

"For some people participating in yesterday's protest, they still feel all of that pent-up rage, because they didn't achieve whatever it was they thought they were going to achieve," Hannah said. These people will return to their online information bubbles, where the extremist rhetoric will only escalate the pressures they feel.

"All of that offline tension mirrors the online tensions."

This feedback loop could be exacerbated through other processes as well. If those who refuse to get vaccinated start to lose their jobs or be barred from public spaces, they'll become more isolated and be pushed further along

their radicalisation journey. Even if there are robust public health justifications for these measures, they could still have unintended side effects.

"We're at a sort of pinch point, or a tipping point, in that complexity language where we don't know what the feedback loop will be. It could be nothing - there could be a natural dropping off. Or the feedback loop could be an intensification because people do actually lose their jobs because of vaccine mandates," Hannah said.

Tuesday's rally shouldn't be laughed off as a non-event. It needs to be taken seriously, understood as just the latest step in a ratcheting up of the rhetorical stakes on the anti-vaccination fringe. The loud and prominent handful upping the stakes with increasingly extremist messages also deserve our focus, because they are amplifying the risk of stochastic violence.

The protesters certainly represent only a tiny minority of the population - with nearly 90 percent of the 12-plus population having had a first shot and many of the remainder not identifying as anti-vax. And only a minority of the protesters themselves are at risk of mobilising to violence.

But it doesn't take more than a handful to cause serious damage and the security risks presented by this movement must be understood in that context.